

# Is Ethics Possible as a Science?

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# Ethics as science?

Philosophers and non-philosophers do not think of ethics as a science

- **Science** studies what there is, not what there ought to be
- **Ethics** is either the (creative) application of received, perhaps slowly changing morals
- Or at best a study conducted from an *a priori* armchair

# Four challenges

## **(1) Philosophical naturalism**

– Unless reduced to something non-ethical, ethical “facts” would be non-natural, hence not scientifically scrutable

## **(2) Moral semantics**

– Or ethical claims cannot be true in the “descriptive” sense

## **(3) Practical vs. theoretical reasoning**

– Theoretical reasoning (or scientific inquiry) differs in kind from practical reasoning (formation of ethical opinion)

## **(4) Empiricism**

– What could serve as the evidence “of the senses” for ethics?

# 1. Naturalism

Ontological naturalism: what there *is*, is studied by science

- But what is *science*?
  - Circular: the study of the *natural* world

⇒ What (ontological) naturalism is and what it implies to ethics depends crucially on the form of scientific realism assumed

# Forms of scientific realism

A-SR: things are (approximately) as our best scientific and common sense theories claim (Devitt)

C-SR: scientific theories are our best but fallible guides to what there is (Niiniluoto)

H-SR: science is underwritten by the hypothesis that there is a reality independent of our views (Peirce, Rydenfelt 2014)

- Science is defined as the attempt to find out how things are
- *Rather* than reality argued to be that which science delivers
- No “first philosophy” required (Rydenfelt 2011)

# Hypothetical realism and ethics

⇒ There is no principled barrier to ethics as science

- Don't block the way of inquiry! (Denial as *scepticism*)

Enables:

- Naturalism without reductionism, or
- Anti-reductionism without non-naturalism

But of course, this merely gives us conceptual room for thinking of any inquiry as potentially scientific

## 2. Moral semantics?

Challenge: the assumption that “it is the case that p” and “it ought to be the case that p” are categorically different

- Moral expressivism (Blackburn, Gibbard): moral claims do not describe reality (whereas scientific claims do)

*Global* expressivism (Huw Price) or anti-representationalism (Rorty)

- No difference between ethical/scientific in semantic terms
- Functional differences
- Compatible with H-SR (Rydenfelt 2014)

Challenges the idea of different *directions of fit* (mind-world, world-mind) (Michael Smith)

# 3. Practical vs. theoretical reasoning

- Theoretical reasons = reasons for belief = justification/evidence for belief that  $p$
- Practical reasons = reasons for action (desire, intention), alternatives:
  - Given by the features of the object that the action would promote (Parfit, Scanlon)
  - Depend on our desires (Williams, Schroeder)
  - Derive from practical Reason (Korsgaard)



# Reasons for belief/desire

- E.g. distinguishing reasons for believing that  $p$  and reasons for desiring that  $p$ 
  - Gives the appearance of a categorical difference (of fit)
- Much of the problem dissolves if we view them as reasons for “thinking” that
  - *it is the case that  $p$*
  - *it ought to be the case that  $p$*

# Instrumentalism vs. inferentialism

Consider (9') formulated as a normative proposition:  
"I ought to relieve..."

Brandom (2000):

Rather (2) and (9) analogous  
= (9) is the *major* premise

(2):  $p$  is a *reason* to think that  $q$

Table 5.1

Transitions among Psychological States	Relations between Propositions
(1) I believe that $p$	(1') $p$
(2) I believe that if $p$ then $q$	(2') If $p$ then $q$
So (3) I believe that $q$	Therefore (3') $q$

Table 5.4

Transitions among Psychological States	Relations between Propositions
(9) I desire that I relieve the itch in my finger	(9') ???
(10) I believe that I can relieve the itch in my finger by scratching it	(10') I can relieve the itch in my finger by scratching it
So (11) I desire that I scratch my finger	Therefore (11') ???

## 4. Evidence and empiricism

Challenge: surely ethics cannot be an empirical science

- Non-naturalists mostly rely on *a priori* intuition

But much recent work on emotions views them as analogous (or a form of) perception

- Spontaneous, non-inferential
- Conceptually “laden”
- Non-inferentially justifying
  - Peirce: emotional interpretants

# The causal question

But is e.g. the feeling of disapprobation (etc.) *caused* by the wrongness of an action?

- Just a case of the *problem of perception*: how do we know, *in general*, if our perception of some quantity/quality (e.g. roundness, redness) is caused by the appropriate property of the object?
- No way of distinguishing from the immediate, subjective point of view
- Objectivity nevertheless achievable (induction)

# Conclusions

1. Hypothetical realism; science understood in terms of reality
  - ⇒ Wider naturalism, no conceptual barriers to ethics as science
2. Global criticism of robust representationalism
  - ⇒ No different directions of fit, different semantic loads
3. Theoretical and practical reasoning species of the same genus
  - ⇒ Both normative, neither more or less “instrumental”
4. Emotions may serve as the ethical evidence of the senses
  - ⇒ Analogy with perception, no principled difference in causation